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ABSTRACT

Due to increasing job insecurity, businesses and employees are looking increasingly to the community college system to provide assistance through immediate, on-the-spot training. This is happening as community colleges are redefining their own missions and purposes, and at a time when they are trying to do more with less and to expand the resources they already have. A survey was conducted in order to answer questions about how college presidents feel about their jobs, about becoming presidents, and about their ability to implement change. Twelve community college presidents from the state of Washington participated in a series of telephone interviews. Answers from the presidents are provided for the following questions: (1) As a new community college president what did you find was your biggest surprise? (2) What has been your biggest disappointment? (3) What has been your single biggest mistake or what would you do differently? (4) What was your most important first step? (5) What words of wisdom would you share with those who are interested in this line of work? (6) Which position(s) prepare one the best for this job? and (7) Now that you have been a community college president for a period of time, do you think you made a correct career choice? (HAA)

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Wallace H. Sigmar

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Presidential Leadership: What Is Important

*by Dr. Wallace H. Sigmar
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Higher education today is at a critical crossroads, and perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than in America's community college system. For years, community colleges have been viewed as the step-siblings of four-year colleges and universities. But a few years ago this viewpoint began to change as society changed, driven by economic forces largely beyond individual control.

Americans moving toward the twenty-first century are a more wary lot than past generations — jobs are no longer secure, a single career focus can no longer be taken for granted, and the promise of a "comfortable retirement" filled with travel and leisure time is no longer a reality for most who are looking into the future.

Americans everywhere are being forced to re-examine their lives, and many are finding that the skills they have — or thought they had — are no longer enough to guarantee employment until they retire, especially as more and more businesses either scale back or close down entirely. As a result, businesses and employees are looking increasingly to the community college system to provide assistance through immediate, on-the-spot training. All of this is happening as community colleges are redefining their own missions and purpose, and at a time when community colleges are trying to do more with less and expand the resources they already have.

Ask any chief administrator of a community college what his or her biggest problem is today and you would probably find general consensus — the dilemma of meeting soaring expectations and demands with ever-leaner resources and staffs. Why, then, one might wonder would anyone want to be a community college president in a time when demands and expectations exceed available resources. It's a good question, but fortunately there are more than a few who seem to relish the challenges inherent in the job, and they are moving into presidential offices all across the country as an older generation of community college presidents begins to retire.

But how do these new presidents really feel about their jobs, and what about those who are considering moving into their ranks? Is it worth it? Can anyone really make a difference today? Or do the times and the expectations make the role impossible? What about the surprises and pitfalls? The disappointments? What might they do differently?

As a relatively new college president myself, I was interested in how some of my colleagues might answer these questions. An opportunity to find out presented itself when I was asked to participate in a workshop on presidential leadership at the 77th annual meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in Anaheim this April. I did my research by tapping into the experiences of nine other community college presidents in my home state of Washington to see what they thought. Over the course of several days, I drafted an informal survey instrument and conducted a series of nine telephone interviews, combining my answers with the responses of the others.

Of the ten who provided answers to the survey instrument, the vast majority have been president for three years or less. The institutions represent a broad cross section of the 32 colleges in the Washington state community and technical college system, including those

based in cities as well as the state's most isolated rural regions. Enrollments vary from a few thousand to several thousand, and the student bodies represent all economic levels and occupational strata.

My original hope was that these interviews would produce some constructive guidelines for those at the AACC conference who were still poised on the edge of making the presidential career decision, and that our collective responses and instructive advice would provide useful information upon which they could base their decision. I think that objective was accomplished, but I think the responses also provide valuable insight into what higher education leadership really is.

I would like to thank the following presidents for participating in the survey and for sharing their ideas as well as their trials, tribulations, and successes. (Note: The responses to the questions that follow do not correspond to the order of the presidents in the list below.)

Dr. Bill Bonaudi, president, Big Bend Community College,
Moses Lake, WA

Dr. Lee Thornton, president, Columbia Basin College, Pasco,
WA

Dr. Jack Oharah, president, Edmonds Community College,
Edmonds, WA

Dr. Susan Carroll, president, Everett Community College,
Everett, WA

Dr. Jewell Manspeaker, president, Grays Harbor College,
Aberdeen, WA

Dr. Donna Allen, interim president, Olympic College,
Bremerton, WA

Mr. Gary Oertli, president, Shoreline Community College,
Shoreline, WA

Dr. Lydia Ledesma, president, Skagit Valley College, Mount Vernon, WA

Dr. Kenneth Minnaert, president, South Puget Sound Community College, Olympia, WA

Dr. James Williams, president, Spokane Community College, Spokane, WA

Dr. Woody Ahn, president, Wenatchee Valley College, Wenatchee, WA

Dr. Linda Kaminski, president, Yakima Valley Community College, Yakima, WA.

As a new community college president what did you find was your biggest surprise?

- The minutia of the Washington state educational system.
- The emotional level or reaction (anger) to decisions or issues related to the college by college staff.
- Problems related to time management (i.e., having to be too many places at once).
- The amount of time it takes to deal with personnel issues.
- That you can't change the world.
- The time it takes to adjust to a new culture.
- The lack of understanding of board members of institutional priorities.
- The amount of time it takes to work with the board of trustees.
- The amount of community support for the college, in spite of difficult problems associated with the former president.
- Budget limitations, especially for those of us coming from other states.
- The challenge of working in a district system, rather than a single campus.
- The degree of power that rests with the office. One must be careful with off-handed comments; they can cause a serious reaction.

As a community college president what has been your biggest disappointment?

- The lack of resources for technology.
- The inability of faculty and staff to adapt to change.
- The lack of resources available for equipment that allows the college to meet employer needs.
- Changes have not happened fast enough.
- The lack of resources to respond to changing community needs.
- The inertia inherent in our community college system and education as a whole.
- Not having enough time to spend with all employees, one of the goals I set for myself when I took the job.
- Lack of support by all the presidents for working as a system (the division between meeting individual campus needs and the requirement to work cooperatively as a state system).
- Not having the time to deal with all of the significant issues (i.e., accreditation, budget development, crisis management, etc.) because of every day demands.
- Coming from a league for college innovation, and now working with a college culture that is not prepared to move and resists change.
- The lack of funds.
- Dealing with personnel issues.
- Legislative micro management.
- Finding that funding for education is enrollment driven, with little opportunity for expanded opportunities based on effort, merit, or innovation.

As a community college president what has been your single biggest mistake. Or — put another way — given what you know now, what would you do differently?

- Negotiate my contract more carefully.
- Spend more time with the faculty early on.

- I was too naive about my own ability to implement change and the time it would take to implement change.
- Allowing an internal candidate to fill a temporary administrative position, who then became an applicant for the position (a lose/lose situation).
- Did not do my homework as well as I should have, and therefore spent too much time on first-year discovery processes rather than engaging in leadership.
- I didn't communicate the strategic planning process well enough before the whole process began.
- Not reorganizing the administrative staff early enough.
- I didn't "read" the institutional commitment to change well enough; most were not as ready to change as they let on.
- I should have been more forceful with the board (of trustees) in establishing the proper role of the president vs. the board.
- I should have required the entire administrative team to reapply for their positions.
- I misunderstood the faculty's strong feelings about resisting change as it related to changing from an instructional-focused college to a student success-focused college.
- I should have held more open meetings with the faculty and staff right from the beginning.
- I would have moved a little slower to implement some changes; I was too aggressive at first.

As a community college president what was your most important first step?

- I emphasized the strength of the college and was positive about the good things.
- I began organizational planning from the beginning to include development of the strategic plan, the campus master plan, etc.
- I was a good listener.
- I established "brown bag" lunches and informal meetings where people could communicate with the president openly.
- I worked, early on, to understand the culture and values of the institution.

- I assessed the college campus and then organized task forces, with representation from all stake-holder groups, to recommend actions on issues that were identified as problem areas for the college.
- I opened channels of communications and worked at building trust.
- I spent time on a personal basis to get to know people on campus.
- I visited every classroom and lab.
- I promoted 12 long-term part-timers to full-time positions.
- I met with people from the "boiler room to the board room."
- Before arriving on campus, I asked each department to identify ten goals for the college. This resulted in a 100-page report, which I used to better understand the priorities of our staff and the culture of the college.
- I reorganized the administrative structure to better meet the needs of the college and the president.
- I built positive relationships with ethnic students, the staff, and the community.
- I took care of long-time and nagging problems, such as wild cats under the buildings (an emotional issue for the campus and surrounding community) by bringing people together and using the process to demonstrate my commitment to participation and involvement in problem solving. While it may seem funny, it afforded me the opportunity to take action using a collaborative management style... And it worked!

As a community college president, what words of wisdom would you share with those who are interested in this line of work?

- Prepare to move from college to college. The experience is very helpful.
- Stay fit and active. You must be in good health to meet the demands of the position.
- Get involved in administrative work early in your career.
- Know the institution you are interested in applying to; don't just take the job to become a president.
- Get to know the board and budget before you apply.
- Have a good set of values and a good feel for the mission of the college.

- Be sure you have your priorities right.
- Integrity, ethics, and high values are critical.
- Be holistic and spiritual and pray or meditate for wisdom.
- Be prepared and do your homework.
- Stay close to your staff.
- Get involved in all full-time hiring decisions. Nothing changes college climate more than hiring decisions.
- Have patience.
- Know thyself.
- Be yourself, both during the interview and on the job, because you want to be sure you have the best fit possible.

In your opinion, which position or positions prepare one the best for the job of being a community college president?

- An executive level in student services or instruction.
- Vice president of instruction.
- Upper management in either instruction, administrative services, or business; not student services.
- Vice president of instruction.
- A broad background is better. Ideally, one would be cross-trained in many areas, with some experience in administrative and financial services.
- Executive experience is necessary. The exact experience depends on the needs of the institution you apply for. The number one requirement is strong interpersonal and communication skills for dealing with people.
- Classroom teaching is necessary to enhance credibility with faculty.
- Either instruction or student services executive responsibility.
- No magic, except upper-level experience.

- Dean for instruction.
- Administrative experience in higher education (not necessarily community colleges) at the management level.
- It is not one's former position that makes the difference, but rather broad experience in things like community relations, a college foundation, and other aspects of college life.

Now that you have been a community college president for a period of time, do you think you made the correct career choice?

Everyone responding gave a resounding yes to this question, and many said it was the best job they had ever had. Many also felt it would not be possible, after being a president, to go back to another administrative position. Instead, they would rather retire or move into another line of work completely. Some, however, indicated they might be interested in teaching after their tenure as a college president was over.

Additional Insights

Other thoughts that resulted from the interview format were not discussed by all the participants, but are points of interest to consider:

- The person you follow makes a big difference.
- The fit between the college and the president is critical.
- Each situation is different, and previous experience may not apply.
- When you apply for jobs, do the following:
 - 1) Learn the process of applying for a presidency.
 - 2) Develop a quality resume and cover letter.
 - 3) Stay on top of the process.

4) Carefully research the institution you apply for so that you shine in the interview.

5) Don't despair if you get rejected. Just move on to the next opportunity.

Conclusions

The views expressed by those who participated in this informal survey instrument are only intended to provide food for thought and possible discussion. I am quite sure that there would be points of disagreement as well as agreement among those who responded; however, I did find more points on which the presidents agreed than disagreed. For example, most noted that their biggest problem was a lack of funds, that communication with the entire campus was an important first step, and that the most important thing a new president could do was to set goals and start immediately on organizational planning and action.

Several also noted that they had failed to understand the depth of feeling that some of the campus had about particular issues, and that they were surprised at how slowly actual change was accepted. The good news, however, was that no one regretted their decision.

If I had but one thought to leave with you, it would be this: More than ever, those in administrative posts at colleges need to encourage people with vision, energy, commitment, and imagination to take on the challenges of leadership associated with becoming a community college president. And we also need to remember that everyone who works at our colleges has a role to play in providing leadership, that it is not the prerogative of a few, but the responsibility of the many, including students. We need to ensure that everyone involved with the college has a sense of ownership and a common commitment to its purpose and goals. If we have this, then we have the true foundation for effective leadership.